

FM Officer Retention

by Major Nancy Combs, Major Bernie Davey, and Captain Gary Gualano

How many times have you heard the expression *people are our most valuable asset*? Probably more times than you can count. Recently, SAF/FMB reinforced this basic tenet of leadership by conducting an officer retention study to look at officer manning and to query officers serving in Financial Management. In addition to analyzing manning data and conducting a survey, a way ahead was developed to address retention concerns. During the SAF/FM Executive Session, a team was appointed to implement the way ahead. This article discusses the need for the study, the results of the analysis and survey, and the ongoing efforts to address the issues raised.

Why Look into Officer Retention?

At the calendar year (CY) 2002 FM Squadron Commander Selection Board, senior FM leadership observed a low number of eligible candidates, particularly lieutenant colonels. Of particular concern was a high number of potential candidates elected to remove themselves from the process. This drove an important question, *Why had so many removed themselves from consideration?* Additionally, the FM officer assignments personnel at AFPC reported on the status of manning, also highlighting a decrease in lieutenant colonel manning, while showing lieutenant manning roughly 329%. This led to an important follow-on question, *With the large number of lieutenants, why do we have so few lieutenant colonels?* As a result, Air Combat Command volunteered to delve into the officer manning issue. Their charter was to determine if FM indeed has a retention problem, and if so, how do we compare to other mission support career fields?

Strategy

Major Nancy Combs, Major Bernie Davey, and Captain Gary Gualano were appointed as team leads to look into the officer manning issue and design a survey to obtain thoughts from the field. They developed a game plan to involve representatives from each command to ensure fair representation from the career field across the Air Force. With the assistance of Majors Lisa McColgan and Mike Monson, the AFPC Comptroller Officer Assignments Team, they gathered manning and year group data from 1979-2001 and compared it against manning data from other mission support career fields. The team knew data alone would not address all of the issues, so they developed a 39-question survey to determine FM officers' backgrounds and to garner their thoughts on certain key issues.

The team designed the survey for all officers with a core FM Air Force Specialty Code, whether currently serving in an FM position or serving in a special duty assignment outside the career field. To legitimize the survey, the team received approval and validation from the survey approval authority at AFPC. From 19 November 2001 until 3 December 2001, FM officers took the survey on the SAF/FM web page. Based on the opinion of AFPC survey experts, the team anticipated a response rate around 25%. However, 57% of FM officers responded, providing senior leadership 333 pages of comments! The respondents weren't just junior officers, but ranged in grade from 2d lieutenant to colonel. This told senior leadership FM officers wanted their voices heard.

Findings

The team analyzed the raw data provided by AFPC and various other sources. This data revealed FM had an abundance of lieutenants, but there was a problem retaining them once they made captain. In addition, the team noticed a problem with retaining lieutenant colonels. This was an important issue since captain and lieutenant colonel authorizations made up nearly 65% of the 839 total FM authorizations in CY00. Shortages in these grades have a serious impact on the career field's ability to fill crucial positions, now and in the future.

To assess the significance of the captain retention problem, the team looked at the Cumulative Continuation Rate (CCR). This is a statistic used by AFPC to estimate the number of officers who reach their 4th year and are expected to stay to their 11th year of service. The latest available CCR for FM officers was only 37%, compared to the average of 43% for all mission support career fields. Translation: only 37 out of every 100 FM officers entering their 4th year of service are expected to complete their 11th year of service. The desired CCR for FM, based on the FM manning plan, is 42%. Seeing this gap, the team further analyzed the raw data and determined most captains who separated were doing so between 5-8 years. This is when their initial active duty service commitments expired.

Since the CCR is only calculated between the 4th and 11th years, this statistic is not applicable to measure lieutenant colonel retention. Therefore, the team used the manning rates for lieutenant colonels to determine if

there was a problem. The manning rate for lieutenant colonels dropped from 85% in 1999 to 58% in 2001, giving FM the lowest lieutenant colonel manning rate of all mission support career fields. Overall, lieutenant colonel authorizations did not change significantly during this time, indicating the drop was an actual loss of personnel. In addition, it was determined many lieutenant colonels were departing the Air Force prior to meeting their colonel board, indicating to senior leadership there were issues needing to be dealt with.

The data further revealed CY00 had the highest percentage overall manning loss since the draw down in CY94 and captains and lieutenant colonels made up 80% of the nearly 100 total officer separations and retirements. Based on the FM manning plan, this exceeded the expected separation rate of 66% for these two grades. During the next year, the averaged captain and lieutenant colonel assigned rate dropped from 72% to 66%, with no significant change in total authorizations.

While the captain and lieutenant colonel grades were suffering, the reverse was true for lieutenants. The average manning rate for lieutenants from FY97-01 was 270%. Although there appeared to be an abundance of lieutenants, the FM manning plan actually called for an average of 400%. Further analysis revealed many lieutenants were filling captain authorizations due to the shortage in that grade. However, the key factor was not the average manning of lieutenants, but the number of lieutenants brought into FM every year. Although AFPC calculations showed FM needed to bring in 90 lieutenants every year, the average for the past 10 years was only 71. The good news is this trend is reversing. In the last two years, FM has exceeded the desired accession rate. If this trend continues, the focus must shift to retention of this quality force. Of course, this leads to a separate set of issues discussed later.

What Those Who Got Out Had to Say

The data could only reveal the high exodus of captains and lieutenant colonels, but could not determine why captains and lieutenant colonels were separating or retiring. The team needed to know “what” was driving them to separate or retire “early.” During the time these officers left the force, exit survey information was seldom used. Consequently, the team contacted several captains who separated shortly after their initial commitment and lieutenant colonels who retired prior to meeting their colonels board. The information obtained revealed interesting revelations as to what drove these members to leave the Air Force.

The captains voiced several reasons for separating just after their initial commitment expired. Lack of job satisfaction, family considerations, and good opportunities on the outside ranked highest on their list. In addition, the captains lamented over a lack of mentorship and leadership along with insufficient leadership opportunities. They also expressed a desire to have more career broadening opportunities. Finally, these captains expressed a desire for a more structured lieutenants training program.

The lieutenant colonels expressed many of the same issues as the captains, but they did have some different reasons for retiring. Specifically, like the captains, the lieutenant colonels claimed senior leadership and mentorship were lacking in the career field. They also felt there were better opportunities outside the Air Force. However, they thought the possibilities for promotion were slim and the high PERSTEMPO had no end in sight. One lieutenant colonel commented that even with promotion to colonel, the chance of getting a meaningful FM job was slim since the perception was higher promotion in this career field did not equate to a more strategic level position. In addition, he felt senior FM officers still do too much technical work. Many of the reasons expressed by the officers interviewed reflected factors outside FM’s control, but several of them are subject to influence from within. Since these were just the thoughts of a few who separated or retired, the team had to see if the rest of the career field felt the same way.

Survey Results

The survey questions were designed to elicit the current attitudes, perceptions, and realities impacting FM officer manning. The team worked hard to develop questions to leave little room for misinterpretation and would result in the most meaningful feedback from all levels. Based on the response rate and the number of comments, the team felt it achieved this objective. Since space does not permit addressing all 39 questions in this article, the results of the survey will be available on the SAF/FM web page for all to view. The following paragraphs are some of the more telling questions and responses.

One such question was, *Do you desire to stay in the military?* Most respondents (80%) said “Yes,” 12% were undecided, and only 8% said “No.” Members wanting to stay in said they enjoyed the military lifestyle and had positive job satisfaction. Conversely, the “No” respondents felt they had little or no job satisfaction. They also felt there were problems with career progression (promotions, senior leadership opportunities, etc.), benefits (predominately pay, medical, and dental), job assignments, and mentorship.

When asked more specifically, *Do you desire to stay within the FM career field?* only 66% said “Yes.” Another 19% were undecided and 15% said “No.” The respondents desiring to stay in FM expressed the same reasons to stay as those expressed for staying in the military. However, the reasons expressed for getting out of FM differed from those who wanted out of the military. The “No” respondents claimed they wanted to career broaden or seek an

operational assignment, and felt promotion opportunities were better in other career fields. Some expressed the desire to experience senior command challenges as a group or wing commander, an opportunity requiring the member to step outside the FM community. Further, some expressed a desire to serve as a comptroller squadron commander but felt the opportunity would not be available to them.

Another question asked, *Are there circumstances that might cause you to consider leaving (FM)?* Despite the high percentage expressing the desire to stay, 62% said there were circumstances that might cause them to leave. Some of those circumstances were family, stability, and the ability to balance work with family, the opportunity to cross train, career progression, career broadening, and senior leadership. Additionally, several commented on job satisfaction, workload, and civilian job opportunities.

The survey also asked FM officers, *If you plan on leaving the FM career field prior to retirement, what would entice you to stay?* One of the top comments was a bonus. Other top comments included better career progression, more say in location of assignment, senior leader improvement in support and mentorship, better benefits, and modification of practices, policies, and procedures to work smarter.

When asked, *Do you feel your talents are being fully utilized in your current position?* the majority of respondents (66%) felt they were being fully utilized. But, one-third of the officers felt they were not challenged. They felt they needed more responsibility, the work they performed was uninspiring and mundane, they needed more leadership opportunities, and they were micromanaged. Many felt their supervisors and senior leaders did not listen to their ideas.

One final question asked, *What do you feel would utilize your talents more efficiently?* Top comments included more leadership and management opportunities, diversification within FM disciplines, better training, and less micromanagement. Several respondents felt increased responsibilities and opportunities would give them a greater sense of job satisfaction. They sought more out-of-the box thinking and career broadening or operational opportunities. Another recurring theme was the lack of solid mentorship. Still others felt that if they were able to perform more analysis in their jobs, they would feel more fully utilized.

Throughout the survey, several overall themes became evident. The top ten themes in order of frequency of appearance were: 1) Family/stability/work balance; 2) career progression; 3) career broadening/operational opportunities; 4) benefits; 5) location; 6) senior leadership; 7) civilian job prospects; 8) job assignment; 9) cross-training opportunities; and 10) leadership/management opportunities.

However, when asked for improvements from the field, the top ten comments took a different spin. First, respondents wanted more effective senior leadership. For example, leaders clearly defining their roles and responsibilities and giving clear guidance. Respondents expect leaders to protect manning levels, to *walk the talk*, and ensure FM has the right candidates for squadron commanders. Second, FM officers are looking for quality mentorship. Many felt this was lacking from their senior leaders and wanted a formal mentorship program established. Closely tied was the number three comment to develop a comprehensive lieutenant training plan.

The fourth top response was from those who stated they wanted to see a formal program to develop leaders (Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) is a great start). Fifth, FM officers expect all FMers to uphold military standards and professional conduct, remembering we are in the military and are held to a higher standard than our civilian counterparts. The sixth most prevalent comment dealt with fully integrating the O&M and Acquisition areas (this pertains to FMers serving in the Acquisition world, not the Acquisition AFSCs). The number seven comment was to not place lieutenants in Acquisition, DFAS or HQs for their first assignment. Many felt new officers needed to serve in base level assignments to complete their “bluing”.

Eighth on the list was to encourage well-rounded officers. FM officers have been taught they are Air Force officers first and FMers second. However, many felt the FM career field encourages segregation from operational peers. These respondents wanted more integration into the operational side of the Air Force. The ninth most frequent comment dealt with revamping the Schoolhouse, stating the curriculum was out of date and not applicable to their current duties. The Schoolhouse staff performed a major curriculum overhaul earlier this year that should correct these concerns. Lastly, the respondents wanted to see more support for career broadening.

Overall, the survey confirmed FM officers are generally happy and want to stay in the military and in FM. However, there is a large number (35%) who are undecided or don't want to stay in FM. Additionally, 34% don't feel they are fully utilized in their current positions. The comments revealed several areas that leadership can address including leadership, mentorship, officership, and training. All these areas are within FM's control to improve.

Recommendations

The retention team developed several recommendations to address the concerns raised by the officers who responded. Two recommendations that can be developed in the near-term include the development of a formal FM lieutenants training program and the development of a “true” mentorship program. A third recommendation for the near-term was to revisit the FM squadron commander criteria and eligibility to ensure FM has the right

people in the right job at the right time. Another great idea was to implement a re-recruiting campaign to provide face-to-face interaction between junior and senior officers. Other near-term recommendations included conducting a Schoolhouse utilization and training workshop in 2003, reviewing the possibility of a bonus for captains in the 5-8 year window, and conducting an exit survey for all members separating or retiring. In addition, one of the most important recommendations to come from the group was to ensure communication on the myriad of issues affecting FMers, ranging from career broadening, to promotion rates, to squadron/group/wing command opportunities.

Looking past the near-term, there were several viable midterm recommendations to include developing a recruiting goal to meet long-term requirements, incorporating mentorship training for our leaders at Professional Military Comptroller School and squadron commander training, establishing a plan to flow officers between operational and acquisition assignments, and providing more career broadening opportunities. The team recommended publishing more information in *The Air Force Comptroller* on promotion statistics, career broadening, and DAL opportunities. In addition, the team recommended a “re-bluing” program to flow FM officers between operational jobs, and vice versa. Lastly, the team recommended developing a guide for civilian supervisors to lead, mentor, and train our FMers.

Final Thoughts

This project was time consuming and arduous, but now the real work begins. FM officers have spoken and senior FM management is listening. Colonel Larry Spencer, ACC Comptroller, recently briefed the SAF/FM Executive Session on the results of this study. SAF/FM is in the process of appointing a team to implement the recommendations. Team composition will include representatives from all officer ranks, from all commands with various backgrounds, and job histories. Senior leadership is serious about addressing the concerns expressed by the officer corps and is moving out to make changes to address the issues you’ve raised. Also, we’ll look at options to solicit feedback from our enlisted members and civilians as well. As Vance Havner, a noted 20th century preacher once said, *The vision must be followed by the venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps—We must step up the stairs.* Another great American, Maj Gen Stephen Lorenz, said, *we are on a journey.* In our collective efforts to make the FM career one we can all be proud to serve in, the journey starts now—one step at a time.

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About the Authors



Major Nancy Combs is Chief, Budget Integration Team, HQ ACC, Langley AFB VA. Her assignments include tours as a command and control operations officer, current operations flight commander, acquisitions budget officer, executive officer, and comptroller. She is a member of the American Society of Military Comptrollers.

Major Bernie Davey is Chief, Finance Operations Branch, HQ ACC, Langley AFB VA. His assignments include tours as a comptroller commander, accounting and finance officer and chief, comptroller plans and programs. He is a member of the American Society of Military Comptrollers.

Captain Gary Gualano is Chief, Comptroller Plans and Programs Branch, HQ ACC, Langley AFB VA. His assignments include tours as a base level budget officer, and acquisitions budget officer. He is a member of the American Society of Military Comptrollers.

